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B. Wendell

WALTER BESANT

THE

ART OF FICTION

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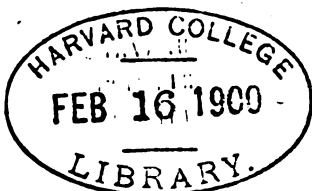
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Prof. B. Wendell



THE ART OF FICTION:

A LECTURE

DELIVERED AT THE ROYAL INSTITUTION, APRIL 25, 1884.

I DESIRE, this evening, to consider Fiction as one of the Fine-Arts. In order to do this, and before doing it, I have first to advance certain propositions. They are not new, they are not likely to be disputed, and yet they have never been so generally received as to form part, so to speak, of the national mind. These propositions are three, though the last two directly spring from the first. They are:—

1. That Fiction is an Art in every way worthy to be called the sister and the equal of the Arts of Painting, Sculpture, Music, and Poetry; that is to say, her field is as boundless, her possibilities as vast, her excellences as worthy of admiration, as may be claimed for any of her sister Arts.

2. That it is an Art which, like them, is governed and directed by general laws; and that these laws may be laid down and taught with as much precision and exactness as the laws of harmony, perspective, and proportion.

3. That, like the other Fine Arts, Fiction is so far removed from the mere mechanical arts, that

no laws or rules whatever can teach it to those who have not already been endowed with the natural and necessary gifts.

These are the three propositions which I have to discuss. It follows as a corollary and evident deduction that, these propositions once admitted, those who follow and profess the Art of Fiction must be recognized as artists, in the strictest sense of the word, just as much as those who have delighted and elevated mankind by music and painting; and that the great Masters of Fiction must be placed on the same level as the great Masters in the other Arts. In other words, I mean that where the highest point, or what seems the highest point, possible in this Art is touched, the man who has reached it is one of the world's greatest men.

I cannot suppose that there are any in this room who would refuse to admit these propositions; on the contrary, they will seem to most here self-evident; yet the application of theory to practice, of principle to persons, may be more difficult. For instance, so boundless is the admiration for great Masters such as Raphael or Mozart, that if one were to propose that Thackeray should be placed beside them, on the same level, and as an equal, there would be felt by most a certain shock. I am not suggesting that the art of Thackeray is to be compared with that of Raphael, or that there is any similarity in the work of the two men; I only say that, Fiction being one Art, and Painting another and a sister Art,

those who attain the highest possible distinction in either are equal.

Let us, however, go outside this room, among the multitudes by whom a novelist has never been considered an artist at all. To them the claim that a great novelist should be considered to occupy the same level as a great musician, a great painter, or a great poet, would appear at first a thing ludicrous and even painful. Consider for a moment how the world at large regards the novelist. He is, in their eyes, a person who tells stories, just as they used to regard the actor as a man who tumbled on the stage to make the audience laugh, and a musician as a man who fiddled to make the people dance. This is the old way of thinking, and most people think first as they have been taught to think; and next as they see others think. It is therefore quite easy to understand why the art of novel-writing has always been, by the general mass, undervalued. First, while the leaders in every other branch of Art, in every department of Science, and in every kind of profession, receive their share of the ordinary national distinctions, no one ever hears of honors being bestowed upon novelists. Neither Thackeray nor Dickens was ever, so far as I know, offered a Peerage; neither King, Queen, nor Prince in any country throughout the whole world takes the least notice of them. I do not say they would be any the better for this kind of recognition, but its absence clearly proves, to those who take their

opinions from others, that they are not a class at all worthy of special honor. Then again, in the modern craze which exists for every kind of art—so that we meet everywhere, in every household, amateur actors, painters, etchers, sculptors, modellers, musicians, and singers, all of them serious and earnest in their aims—amateur novelists alone regard their Art as one which is learned by intuition. Thirdly, novelists are not associated as are painters; they hold no annual exhibitions, dinners, or conversazioni; they put no letters after their name; they have no President or Academy; and they do not themselves seem desirous of being treated as followers of a special Art. I do not say that they are wrong, or that much would be gained for Art if all the novelists of England were invited to Court and created into a Royal Academy. But I do say that for these three reasons it is easy to understand how the world at large does not even suspect that the writing of novels is one of the Fine Arts, and why they regard the story-teller with a sort of contempt. It is, I acknowledge, a kindly contempt—even an affectionate contempt; it is the contempt which the practical man feels for the dreamer, the strong man for the weak, the man who can do for the man who can only look on and talk.

The general—the Philistine—view of the Profession is, first of all, that it is not one which a scholar and a man of serious views should take up: the telling of stories is inconsistent with a well-

balanced mind; to be a teller of stories disqualifies one from a hearing on important subjects. At this very day there are thousands of living people who will never understand how the author of "Coningsby" and "Vivian Grey" can possibly be regarded as a serious statesman—all the Disraeli literature, even to the comic cartoons, expresses the popular sentiment that a novelist must not presume to call himself a statesman: the intellect of a novelist, it is felt, if he have any intellect at all, which is doubtful, must be one of the most frivolous and lightest kind; how can a man whose mind is always full of the loves of Corydon and Amaryllis be trusted to form an opinion on practical matters? When Thackeray ventured to contest the city of Oxford, we know what happened. He thought his failure was because the people of Oxford had never even heard of him; I think otherwise. I think it was because it was whispered from house to house and was carried from shop to shop, and was mentioned in the vestry, that this fellow from London, who asked for their votes, was nothing but a common novelist.

With these people must not be confounded another class, not so large, who are prepared to admit that Fiction is in some qualified sense an Art; but they do this as a concession to the vanity of its followers, and are by no means prepared to allow that it is an Art of the first rank. How can that be an Art, they might ask, which has no

lecturers or teachers, no school or college or Academy, no recognized rules, no text-books, and is not taught in any University? Even the German Universities, which teach everything else, do not have Professors of Fiction, and not one single novelist, so far as I know, has ever pretended to teach his mystery, or spoken of it as a thing which may be taught. Clearly, therefore, they would go on to argue, such art as is required for the making and telling of a story can and must be mastered without study, because no materials exist for the student's use. It may even, perhaps, be acquired unconsciously or by imitation. This view, I am sorry to say, largely prevails among the majority of those who try their chance in the field of fiction. Anyone, they think, can write a novel; therefore, why not sit down and write one? I would not willingly say one word which might discourage those who are attracted to this branch of literature; on the contrary, I would encourage them in every possible way. One desires, however, that they should approach their work at the outset with the same serious and earnest appreciation of its importance and its difficulties with which they undertake the study of music and painting. I would wish, in short, that from the very beginning their minds should be fully possessed with the knowledge that Fiction is an Art, and, like all other Arts, that it is governed by certain laws, methods, and rules, which it is their first business to learn.

It is then, first and before all, a real Art. It is the oldest, because it was known and practised long before Painting and her sisters were in existence or even thought of; it is older than any of the Muses from whose company she who tells stories has hitherto been excluded; it is the most widely spread, because in no race of men under the sun is it unknown, even though the stories may be always the same, and handed down from generation to generation in the same form; it is the most religious of all the Arts, because in every age until the present the lives, exploits, and sufferings of gods, goddesses, saints, and heroes have been the favorite theme; it has always been the most popular, because it requires neither culture, education, nor natural genius to understand and listen to a story; it is the most moral, because the world has always been taught whatever little morality it possesses by way of story, fable, apologue, parable, and allegory. It commands the widest influence, because it can be carried easily and everywhere, into regions where pictures are never seen and music is never heard; it is the greatest teaching power, because its lessons are most readily apprehended and understood. All this, which might have been said thousands of years ago, may be said to-day with even greater force and truth. That world which exists not, but is an invention or an imitation—that world in which the shadows and shapes of men move about before our eyes as real as if

they were actually living and speaking among us, is like a great theatre accessible to all of every sort, on whose stage are enacted, at our own sweet will, whenever we please to command them, the most beautiful plays: it is, as every theatre should be, the school in which manners are learned: here the majority of reading mankind learn nearly all that they know of life and manners, of philosophy and art; even of science and religion. The modern novel converts abstract ideas into living models; it gives ideas, it strengthens faith, it preaches a higher morality than is seen in the actual world; it commands the emotions of pity, admiration, and terror; it creates and keeps alive the sense of sympathy; it is the universal teacher; it is the only book which the great mass of reading mankind ever do read; it is the only way in which people can learn what other men and women are like; it redeems their lives from dulness, puts thoughts, desires, knowledge, and even ambitions into their hearts: it teaches them to talk, and enriches their speech with epigrams, anecdotes and illustrations. It is an unfailing source of delight to millions, happily not too critical. Why, out of all the books taken down from the shelves of the public libraries, four-fifths are novels, and of all those that are bought nine-tenths are novels. Compared with this tremendous engine of popular influence, what are all the other Arts put together? Can we not alter the old maxim, and say with truth, Let him who pleases make the laws if I may write the novels?

As for the field with which this Art of Fiction occupies itself, it is, if you please, nothing less than the whole of Humanity. The novelist studies men and women; he is concerned with their actions and their thoughts, their errors and their follies, their greatness and their meanness; the countless forms of beauty and constantly varying moods to be seen among them; the forces which act upon them; the passions, prejudices, hopes and fears which pull them this way and that. He has to do, above all, and before all, with men and women. No one, for instance, among novelists, can be called a landscape painter, or a painter of sea-pieces, or a painter of fruit and flowers, save only in strict subordination to the group of characters with whom he is dealing. Landscape, sea, sky, and air, are merely accessories introduced in order to set off and bring into greater prominence the figures on the stage. The very first rule in Fiction is that the human interest must absolutely absorb everything else. Some writers never permit anything at all in their pages which shall divert our thoughts one moment from the actors. When, for instance, Charles Reade — Alas! that we must say the late Charles Reade, for he is dead — when this great Master of Fiction, in his incomparable tale of the "Cloister and the Hearth," sends Gerard and Denis the Burgundian on that journey through France, it is with the fewest possible of words that he suggests the sights and persons met with on the way; yet, so great is the

art of the writer, that, almost without being told, we see the road, a mere rough track, winding beside the river and along the valleys; we see the silent forests where lurk the *routiers* and the robbers, the cut-throat inn, the merchants, peasants, beggars, soldiers who go riding by; the writer does not pause in his story to tell us of all this, but yet we feel it — by the mere action of the piece and the dialogue we are compelled to see the scenery: the life of the fifteenth century passes before us, with hardly a word to picture it, because it is always kept in the background, so as not to interfere with the central figure of the young clerk journeying to Rome.

{ The human interest in Fiction, then, must come before aught else. It is of this world, wholly of this world. It might seem at first as if the limitation of this Art to things human placed it on a lower level than the Arts of Painting and Music. That, however, is not so. The stupendous subjects which were undertaken by the old Italian painters are, it is true, beyond the power of Fiction to attempt. It may be questioned whether they are not also, according to modern ideas, beyond the legitimate scope of painting. Certainly, just as there is nothing in the whole of creation more worthy of being studied and painted than the human face and form, so there is nothing more worthy of representation than men and women in action and in passion. The ancient poet placed the gods themselves upon the stage with the Furies and the Fates. Then

we had the saints, confessors, and martyrs. We next descended to kings and great lords; in our times painter, poet, and novelist alike are contented with plain humanity, whether crowned or in rags. What picture, let us ask, what picture ever painted of angels and blessed souls, even if they are mounting the hill on which stands the Four Square City of the jasper wall, is able to command our interest and sympathy more profoundly than the simple and faithful story, truly and faithfully told, of a lover and his mistress?

It is, therefore, the especial characteristic of this Art, that, since it deals exclusively with men and women, it not only requires of its followers, but also creates in readers, that sentiment which is destined to be a most mighty engine in deepening and widening the civilization of the world. We call it Sympathy, but it means a great deal more than was formerly understood by the word. It means, in fact, what Professor Seeley once called the Enthusiasm of Humanity, and it first appeared, I think, about a hundred and fifty years ago, when the modern novel came into existence. You will find it, for instance, conspicuous for its absence in Defoe. The modern Sympathy includes not only the power to pity the sufferings of others, but also that of understanding their very souls; it is the reverence for man, the respect for his personality, the recognition of his individuality, and the enormous value of the one man, the perception of one man's relation to another, his

duties and responsibilities. Through the strength of this newly-born faculty, and aided by the guidance of a great artist, we are enabled to discern the real indestructible man beneath the rags and filth of a common castaway, and the possibilities of the meanest gutter-child that steals in the streets for its daily bread. Surely that is a wonderful Art which endows the people—all the people—with this power of vision and of feeling. Painting has not done it, and could never do it; Painting has done more for nature than for humanity. Sculpture could not do it, because it deals with situation and form rather than action. Music cannot do it, because Music (if I understand rightly) appeals especially to the individual concerning himself and his own aspirations. Poetry alone is the rival of Fiction, and in this respect it takes a lower place, not because Poetry fails to teach and interpret, but because Fiction is, and must always be, more popular.

Again, this Art teaches, like the others, by suppression and reticence. Out of the great procession of Humanity, the *Comédie Humaine*, which the novelist sees passing ever before his eyes, single figures detach themselves one after the other, to be questioned, examined, and received or rejected. This process goes on perpetually. Humanity is so vast a field that to one who goes about watching men and women, and does not sit at home and evolve figures out of inner consciousness, there is not, and can never be, any end or limit to the freshness and interest of

these figures. It is the work of the artist to select the figures, to suppress, to copy, to group, and to work up the incidents which each one offers. The daily life of the world is not dramatic—it is monotonous; the novelist makes it dramatic by his silences, his suppressions, and his exaggerations. No one, for example, in fiction behaves quite in the same way as in real life; as on the stage, if an actor unfolds and reads a letter, the simple action is done with an exaggeration of gesture which calls attention to the thing and to its importance; so in romance, while nothing should be allowed which does not carry on the story, so everything as it occurs must be accentuated and yet deprived of needless accessory details. The gestures of the characters at an important juncture, their looks, their voices, may all be noted if they help to impress the situation. Even the weather, the wind and the rain, with some writers, have been made to emphasize a mood or a passion of a heroine. To know how to use these aids artistically is to the novelist exactly what to the actor is the right presentation of a letter, the handing of a chair, even the removal of a glove.

A third characteristic of Fiction, which should alone be sufficient to give it a place among the noblest forms of Art, is that, like Poetry, Painting, and Music, it becomes a vehicle, not only for the best thoughts of the writer, but also for those of the reader, so that a novelist may write truthfully and faithfully, but simply, and yet be understood in a

far fuller and nobler sense than was present to his own mind. This power is the very highest gift of the poet. He has a vision and sees a thing clearly, yet perhaps afar off; another who reads him is enabled to get the same vision, to see the same thing, yet closer and more distinctly. For a lower intellect thus to lead and instruct a higher is surely a very great gift, and granted only to the highest forms of Art. And this it is which Fiction of the best kind does for its readers. It is, however, only another way of saying that Truth in Fiction produces effects similar to those produced by Truth in every other Art.

So far, then, I have showed that this Art of Fiction is the most ancient of all Arts and the most popular; that its field is the whole of humanity; that it creates and develops that sympathy which is a kind of second sight; that, like all other Arts, its function is to select, to suppress, and to arrange; that it suggests as well as narrates. More might be said — a great deal more — but enough has been said to show that in these, the leading characteristics of any Art, Fiction is on exactly the same level as her sisters. Let me only add that in this Art, as in the others, there is, and will be always, whatever has been done already, something new to discover, something new to express, something new to describe. Surgeons dissect the body, and account for every bone and every nerve, so that the body of one man, considered as a collection of bones and nerves,

is so far exactly like the body of another man. But the mind of man cannot be so exhausted: it yields discoveries to every patient student; it is absolutely inexhaustible; it is to every one a fresh and virgin field: and the most successful investigator leaves regions and tracts for his successor as vast as those he has himself gone over. Perhaps, after all, the greatest Psychologist is not the metaphysician, but the novelist.

We come next to speak of the Laws which govern this Art. I mean those general rules and principles which must necessarily be acquired by every writer of Fiction before he can even hope for success. Rules will not make a man a novelist, any more than a knowledge of grammar makes a man know a language, or a knowledge of musical science makes a man able to play an instrument. Yet the Rules must be learned. And, in speaking of them, one is compelled, so close is the connection between the sister Arts, to use not only the same terms, but also to adopt the same rules, as those laid down by painters for their students. If these Laws appear self-evident, it is a proof that the general principles of the Art are well understood. Considering, however, the vast quantity of bad, inartistic work which is every week laid before the public, one is inclined to think that a statement of these principles may not be without usefulness.

First, and before everything else, there is the Rule that everything in Fiction which is invented and is

not the result of personal experience and observation is worthless. In some other Arts, the design may follow any lines which the designer pleases: it may be fanciful, unreal, or grotesque; but in modern Fiction, whose sole end, aim, and purpose is to portray humanity and human character, the design must be in accordance with the customs and general practice of living men and women under any proposed set of circumstances and conditions. That is to say, the characters must be real, and such as might be met with in actual life, or, at least, the natural developments of such people as any of us might meet; their actions must be natural and consistent; the conditions of place, of manners, and of thought must be drawn from personal observation. To take an extreme case: a young lady brought up in a quiet country village should avoid descriptions of garrison life; a writer whose friends and personal experiences belong to what we call the lower middle class should carefully avoid introducing his characters into Society; a South-countryman would hesitate before attempting to reproduce the North-country accent. This is a very simple Rule, but one to which there should be no exception — never to go beyond your own experience.* Remember

* It has been objected to this Rule that, if followed, it would entirely shut out the historical novel. Not at all. The interest of the historical novel, as of any other novel, depends upon the experience and knowledge which the writer has of humanity, men and women being pretty much alike in all ages. It is not the setting that we regard, so much as the

that most of the people who read novels, and know nothing about the art of writing them, recognize before any other quality that of fidelity: the greatness of a novelist they measure chiefly by the knowledge of the world displayed in his pages; the highest praise they can bestow upon him is that he has drawn the story to the life. It is exactly the same with a picture. If you go to the Academy any day, and listen to the comments of the crowd,

acting of the characters. The setting in an historical novel is very often absurd, incorrect, and incongruous; but the human interest, the skill and knowledge of character shown by the writer, may make us forget the errors of the setting. For instance, "Romola" is undoubtedly a great novel, not because it contains a true, and therefore valuable, reproduction of Florentine life in the time of the early Renaissance; for it does not; nor because it gives us the ideas of the age, for it does not; the characters, especially that of the heroine, being fully of nineteenth century ideas: but it is great as a study of character. On the other hand, in the "Cloister and the Hearth," we do really have a description of the time and its ideas, taken bodily, sometimes almost literally, from the pages of the man who most truly represents them — Erasmus. So that here is a rule for the historical novelist — when he must describe, he must borrow. If it be objected, again, that he may do the same thing with contemporary life, I reply that he may, if he please, but he will *most assuredly be found out* through some blunder, omission, or confusion caused by ignorance. No doubt the same blunders are perpetrated by the historical novelist; but these are not so readily found out except by an archæologist. Of course, one who desires to reproduce a time gone by would not go to the poets, the divines, the historians, so much as to the familiar literature, the letters, comedies, tales, essayists, and newspapers.

which is a very instructive thing to do, and one recommended to young novelists, you will presently become aware that the only thing they look for in a picture is the story which it tells, and therefore the fidelity with which it is presented on the canvas. Most of the other qualities of the picture, and of the novel as well, all that has to do with the technique, escape the general observer.

This being so, the first thing which has to be acquired is the art of description. It seems easy to describe; any one, it seems, can set down what he sees. But consider. How much does he see? There is everywhere, even in a room, such a quantity of things to be seen: far, far more in field and hedge, in mountain and in forest and beside the stream, are there countless things to be seen; the unpractised eye sees nothing, or next to nothing. Here is a tree, here is a flower, there is sunshine lying on the hill. But to the observant and trained eye, the intelligent eye, there lies before him everywhere an inexhaustible and bewildering mass of things to see. Remember how Mr. Jefferies sits down in a coppice with his eyes wide open to see what the rest of us never dreamed of looking for. Long before he has half finished telling us what he has seen — behold! a volume, and one of the most delightful volumes conceivable. But, then, Mr. Jefferies is a profound naturalist. We cannot all describe after his manner; nor should we try, for the simple reason that descriptions of still life in a

novel must be strictly subordinated to the human interest. But while Mr. Jefferies has his hedge and ditch and brook, we have our towns, our villages, and our assemblies of men and women. Among them we must not only observe, but we must select. Here, then, are two distinct faculties which the intending novelist must acquire; viz., observation and selection. As for the power of observation, it may be taught to any one by the simple method adopted by Robert Houdin, the French conjuror. This method consists of noting down continually and remembering all kinds of things remarked in the course of a journey, a walk, or the day's business. The learner must carry his note-book always with him, into the fields, to the theatre, into the streets—wherever he can watch man and his ways, or Nature and her ways. On his return home he should enter his notes in his commonplace-book. There are places where the production of a note-book would be embarrassing—say, at a dinner-party, or a street fight; yet the man who begins to observe will speedily be able to remember everything that he sees and hears until he can find an opportunity to note it down, so that nothing is lost.*

* I earnestly recommend those who desire to study this Art to begin by daily practice in the description of things, even common things, that they have observed, by reporting conversations, and by word portraits of their friends. They will find that the practice gives them firmness of outline, quickness of observation, power of catching important details, and, as regards dialogue, readiness to see what is unin-

The materials for the novelist, in short, are not in the books upon the shelves, but in the men and women he meets with everywhere; he will find them, where Dickens found them, in the crowded streets, in trains, tramcars and omnibuses, at the shop-windows, in churches and chapels: his materials are everywhere — there is nothing too low, nothing too high, nothing too base, nothing too noble, for the novelist. Humanity is like a kaleidoscope, which you may turn about and look into, but you will never get the same picture twice — it cannot be exhausted. But it may be objected, that the broad distinctive types have been long since all used. They *have* been used, but the comfort is that they can never be used up, and that they may be constantly used again and again. Can we ever be tired of them when a master hand takes one of them again and gives him new life? Are there to be no more hypocrites because we have already had Tartufe and Pecksniff? Do we suppose that the old miser, the young spendthrift, the gambler, the adventurer, the coquette, the drunkard, the soldier of fortune, are never to reappear, because they have been handled already? As long, on the contrary, as man shall continue story-telling, so long will these characters occur again and again, and look as fresh

portant. Preliminary practice and study of this kind will also lead to the saving of a vast quantity of valuable material, which is only wasted by being prematurely worked up into a novel written before the elements of the Art have been acquired.

each time that they are treated by a master's hand as if they were newly discovered types.

Fidelity, therefore, can be only assured by acquiring the art of observation, which further assists in filling the mind with stored experience. I am quite sure that most men never see anything at all. I have known men who have even gone all round the world and seen nothing—no, nothing at all. Emerson says, very truly, that a traveller takes away nothing from a place except what he brought into it. Now, the observation of things around us is no part of the ordinary professional and commercial life; it has nothing at all to do with success and the making of money; so that we do not learn to observe. Yet it is very easy to shake people and make them open their eyes. Some of us remember, for instance, the time when Kingsley astonished everybody with his descriptions of the wonders to be seen on the sea-shore and to be fished out of every pond in the field. Then all the world began to poke about the seaweed and to catch tritons and keep water-grubs in little tanks. It was only a fashion, and it presently died out; but it did people good, because it made them understand, perhaps for the first time, that there really is a good deal more to see than meets the casual eye. At present the lesson which we need is not that the world is full of the most strange and wonderful creatures, all eating each other perpetually, but that the world is full of the most wonderful men and women, not one of whom is mean or

common, but to each his own personality is a great and awful thing, worthy of the most serious study.

There are, then, abundant materials waiting to be picked up by any who has the wit to see them lying at his feet and all around him. What is next required is the power of Selection. Can this be taught? I think not, at least I do not know how, unless it is by reading. In every Art, selection requires that kind of special fitness for the Art which is included in the much abused word Genius. In Fiction the power of selection requires a large share of the dramatic sense. Those who already possess this faculty will not go wrong if they bear in mind the simple rule that nothing should be admitted which does not advance the story, illustrate the characters, bring into stronger relief the hidden forces which act upon them, their emotions, their passions, and their intentions. All descriptions which hinder instead of helping the action, all episodes of whatever kind, all conversation which does not either advance the story or illustrate the characters, ought to be rigidly suppressed.

Closely connected with selection is dramatic presentation. Given a situation, it should be the first care of the writer to present it as dramatically, that is to say as forcibly, as possible. The grouping and setting of the picture, the due subordination of description to dialogue, the rapidity of the action, those things which naturally suggest themselves to the practised eye, deserve to be very carefully considered by the beginner. In fact, a novel is like a

play: it may be divided into scenes and acts, tableaux and situations, separated by the end of the chapter instead of the drop-scene: the writer is the dramatist, stage-manager, scene-painter, actor, and carpenter, all in one; it is his single business to see that none of the scenes flag or fall flat: he must never for one moment forget to consider how the piece is looking from the front. .

The next simple Rule is that the drawing of each figure must be clear in outline, and, even if only sketched, must be sketched without hesitation. This can only be done when the writer himself sees his figures clearly. Characters in fiction do not, it must be understood, spring Minerva-like from the brain. They grow: they grow sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly. From the first moment of conception, that is to say, from the first moment of their being seen and caught, they grow continuously and almost without mental effort. If they do not grow and become every day clearer, they had better be put aside at once, and forgotten as soon as may be, because that is a proof that the author does not understand the character he has himself endeavored to create. To have on one's hands a half-created being without the power of finishing him must be a truly dreadful thing. The only way out of it is to kill and bury him at once. I have always thought, for instance, that the figure of Daniel Deronda, whose portrait, blurred and uncertain as it is, has been drawn with the most amazing care and

with endless touches and retouches, must have become at last to George Eliot a kind of awful veiled spectre, always in her brain, always seeming about to reveal his true features and his mind, but never doing it, so that to the end she never clearly perceived what manner of man he was, nor what was his real character. Of course, what the author cannot set down, the reader cannot understand. On the other hand, how possible, how capable of development, how real becomes a true figure, truly understood by the creator, and truly depicted! Do we not know what they would say and think under all conceivable conditions? We can dress them as we will; we can place them in any circumstances of life: we can always trust them because they will never fail us, never disappoint us, never change, because we understand them so thoroughly. So well do we know them that they become our advisers, our guides, and our best friends, on whom we model ourselves, our thoughts, and our actions. The writer who has succeeded in drawing to the life, true, clear, distinct, so that all may understand, a single figure of a true man or woman, has added another exemplar or warning to humanity. Nothing, then, it must be insisted upon as of the greatest importance, should be begun in writing until the characters are so clear and distinct in the brain, so well known, that they will act their parts, bend their dialogue, and suit their action to whatever situations they may find themselves in, if only they

are becoming to them. Of course, clear outline drawing is best when it is accomplished in the fewest strokes, and the greater part of the figures in Fiction, wherein it differs from Painting, in which everything should be finished, require no more work upon them, in order to make them clear, than half-a-dozen bold, intelligible lines.

As for the methods of conveying a clear understanding of a character, they are many. The first and the easiest is to make it clear by reason of some mannerism or personal peculiarity, some trick of speech or of carriage. This is the worst, as may generally be said of the easiest way. Another easy method is to describe your character at length. This also is a bad, because a tedious, method. If, however, you read a page or two of any good writer, you will discover that he first makes a character intelligible by a few words, and then allows him to reveal himself in action and dialogue. On the other hand, nothing is more inartistic than to be constantly calling attention in a dialogue to a gesture or a look, to laughter or to tears. The situation generally requires no such explanation: in some well-known scenes which I could quote, there is not a single word to emphasize or explain the attitude, manner, and look of the speakers, yet they are as intelligible as if they were written down and described. That is the highest art which carries the reader along and makes him see, without being told, the changing expressions, the gestures of the speakers,

and hear the varying tones of their voices. It is as if one should close one's eyes at the theatre, and yet continue to see the actors on the stage as well as hear their voices. The only writer who can do this is he who makes his characters intelligible from the very outset, causes them first to stand before the reader in clear outline, and then with every additional line brings out the figure, fills up the face, and makes his creatures grow from the simple outline more and more to the perfect and rounded figure.

Clearness of drawing, which includes clearness of vision, also assists in producing directness of purpose. As soon as the actors in the story become real in the mind of the narrator, and not before, the story itself becomes real to him. More than this, he becomes straightway vehemently impelled to tell it, and he is moved to tell it in the best and most direct way, the most dramatic way, the most truthful way possible to him. It is, in fact, only when the writer believes his own story, and knows it to be every word true, and feels that he has somehow learned from everyone concerned the secret history of his own part in it, that he can really begin to write it.* We know how sometimes, even from a

* Hardly anything is more important than this—to believe in your own story. Wherefore let the student remember that unless the characters exist and move about in his brain, all separate, distinct, living, and perpetually engaged in the action of the story, sometimes at one part of it, sometimes at another, and that in scenes and places which

practised hand, there comes a work marred with the fatal defect that the writer does not believe in his own story. When this is the case, one may generally find on investigation that one cause at least of the failure is that the characters, or some of them, are blurred and uncertain.

Again, the modern English novel, whatever form it takes, almost always starts with a conscious moral purpose. When it does not, so much are we accustomed to expect it, that one feels as if there has been a debasement of the Art. It is, fortunately, not possible in this country for any man to defile and defame humanity and still be called an artist; the development of modern sympathy, the growing reverence for the individual, the ever-widening love of things beautiful and the appreciation of lives made beautiful by devotion and self-denial, the sense of personal responsibility among the English-speaking races, the deep-seated religion of our people, even in a time of doubt, are all forces which act strongly upon the artist as well as upon his readers, and lend to his work, whether he will or not, a moral purpose so clearly marked that it has become practically a law of English Fiction. We must acknowledge that this is a truly admirable thing,

must be omitted in the writing, he has got no story to tell and had better give it up. I do not think it is generally understood that there are thousands of scenes which belong to the story and never get outside the writer's brain at all. Some of these may be very beautiful and touching; but there is not room for all, and the writer has to select.

and a great cause for congratulation. At the same time, one may be permitted to think that the preaching novel is the least desirable of any, and to be unfeignedly rejoiced that the old religious novel, written in the interests of High Church or Low Church or any other Church, has gone out of fashion.

Next, just as in Painting and Sculpture, not only are fidelity, truth, and harmony to be observed in Fiction, but also beauty of workmanship. It is almost impossible to estimate too highly the value of careful workmanship, that is, of style. Everyone, without exception, of the great Masters in Fiction, has recognized this truth. You will hardly find a single page in any of them which is not carefully and even elaborately worked up. I think there is no point on which critics of novels should place greater importance than this, because it is one which young novelists are so very liable to ignore. There ought not to be in a novel, any more than in a poem, a single sentence carelessly worded, a single phrase which has not been considered. Consider, if you please, any one of the great scenes in Fiction—how much of the effect is due to the style, the balanced sentences, the very words used by the narrator! This, however, is only one more point of similarity between Fiction and the sister Arts. There is, I know, the danger of attaching too much attention to style at the expense of situation, and so falling a prey to priggishness, fashions, and man-

nerisms of the day. It is certainly a danger; at the same time, it sometimes seems, when one reads the slipshod, careless English which is often thought good enough for story-telling, that it is almost impossible to overrate the value of style. There is comfort in the thought that no reputation worth having can be made without attending to style, and that there is no style, however rugged, which cannot be made beautiful by attention and pains. "How many times," a writer once asked a girl who brought him her first effort for advice and criticism; "how many times have you re-written this page?" She confessed that she had written it once for all, had never read it afterwards, and had not the least idea that there was such a thing as style. Is it not presumptuous in the highest degree to believe that what one has produced without pains, thought, or trouble will give any pleasure to the reader?

In fact every scene, however unimportant, should be completely and carefully finished. There should be no unfinished places, no sign anywhere of weariness or haste—in fact, no scamping. The writer must so love his work as to dwell tenderly on every age and be literally unable to send forth a single page of it without the finishing touches. We all of us remember that kind of novel in which every scene has the appearance of being hurried and scamped.

To sum up these few preliminary and general

laws. The Art of Fiction requires first of all the power of description, truth, and fidelity, observation, selection, clearness of conception and of outline, dramatic grouping, directness of purpose, a profound belief on the part of the story-teller in the reality of his story, and beauty of workmanship. It is, moreover, an Art which requires of those who follow it seriously that they must be unceasingly occupied in studying the ways of mankind, the social laws, the religions, philosophies, tendencies, thoughts, prejudices, superstitions of men and women. They must consider as many of the forces which act upon classes and upon individuals as they can discover; they should be always trying to put themselves into the place of another; they must be as inquisitive and as watchful as a detective, as suspicious as a criminal lawyer, as eager for knowledge as a physicist, and withal fully possessed of that spirit to which nothing appears mean, nothing contemptible, nothing unworthy of study, which belongs to human nature.

I repeat that I submit some of these laws as perhaps self-evident. If that is so, many novels which are daily submitted to the reviewer are written in wilful neglect and disobedience of them. But they are not really self-evident; those who aspire to be artists in Fiction almost invariably begin without any understanding at all of these laws. Hence the lamentable early failures, the waste of good material, and the low level of Art with which both the

novel-writer and the novel-reader are too often contented. I am certain that if these laws were better known and more generally studied, a very large proportion of the bad works of which our critics complain would not be produced at all. And I am in great hopes that one effect of the establishment of the newly founded Society of Authors will be to keep young writers of fiction from rushing too hastily into print, to help them to the right understanding of their Art and its principles, and to guide them into true practice of their principles while they are still young, their imaginations strong, and their personal experiences as yet not wasted in foolish failures.

After all these preliminary studies there comes the most important point of all — the story. There is a school which pretends that there is no need for a story: all the stories, they say, have been told already; there is no more room for invention: nobody wants any longer to listen to a story. One hears this kind of talk with the same wonder which one feels when a new monstrous fashion changes the beautiful figure of woman into something grotesque and unnatural. Men say these things gravely to each other, especially men who have no story to tell: other men listen gravely; in the same way women put on the newest and most preposterous fashions gravely, and look upon each other without either laughing or hiding their faces for shame. It is, indeed, if we think of it, a most strange and

wonderful theory, that we should continue to care for Fiction and cease to care for the story. We have all along been training ourselves how to tell the story, and here is this new school which steps in, like the needy knife-grinder, to explain that there is no story left at all to tell. Why, the story is everything. I cannot conceive of a world going on at all without stories, and those strong ones, with incident in them, and merriment and pathos, laughter and tears, and the excitement of wondering what will happen next. Fortunately, these new theorists contradict themselves, because they find it impossible to write a novel which shall not contain a story, although it may be but a puny bantling. Fiction without adventure—a drama without a plot—a novel without surprises—the thing is as impossible as life without uncertainty.*

As for the story, then. And here theory and teaching can go no farther. For every Art there is the corresponding science which may be taught. We have been speaking of the corresponding science. But the Art itself can neither be taught nor communicated. If the thing is in a man he will bring it out somehow, well or badly, quickly or slowly. If it is not, he can never learn it. Here,

* A correspondent asks me if I do not like the work of Mr. Howells. Of course one cannot choose but like his writing. But one cannot also avoid comparing his work with that of his countryman, Nathaniel Hawthorne, who added to the charm of style the interest of a romantic and exciting story.

then, let us suppose that we have to do with the man to whom the invention of stories is part of his nature. We will also suppose that he has mastered the laws of his Art, and is now anxious to apply them. To such a man one can only recommend that he should with the greatest care and attention analyze and examine the construction of certain works, which are acknowledged to be of the first rank in fiction. Among them, not to speak of Scott, he might pay especial attention, from the constructive point of view, to the truly admirable shorter stories of Charles Reade, to George Eliot's "Silas Marner," the most *perfect* of English novels, Hawthorne's "Scarlet Letter," Holmes's "Elsie Venner," Blackmore's "Lorna Doone," or Black's "Daughter of Heth." He must not sit down to read them "for the story," as uncritical people say: he must read them slowly and carefully, perhaps backwards, so as to discover for himself how the author built up the novel, and from what original germ or conception it sprang. Let me take another novel by another writer to illustrate my meaning. It is James Payn's "Confidential Agent," a work showing, if I may be permitted to say so, constructive power of the very highest order. You have all, without doubt, read that story. As you know, it turns upon a diamond robbery. To the unpractised hand it would seem as if stories of theft had already been told *ad nauseam*. The man of experience knows better: he knows that in his hands every story becomes new,

because he can place it upon his stage with new incidents, new conditions, and new actors. Accordingly, Payn connects his diamonds with three or four quite ordinary families: he does not search for strange and eccentric characters, but uses the folk he sees around him, plain middle-class people, to whom most of us belong. He does not try to show these people cleverer, better cultured, or in any respect at all other than they really are, except that some of them talk a little better than in real life they would be likely to do. That is to say, in dialogue he exercises the art of selection. Presently, in this quiet household of age and youth, love and happiness, there happens a dreadful thing: the young husband vanishes amid circumstances which give rise to the most horrible suspicions. How this event acts upon the minds of the household and their friends: how the faith, sorely tried, of one breaks down, and that of another remains steadfast: how the truth is gradually disclosed, and the innocence of the suspected man is made clear — all this should be carefully examined by the student as a lesson in construction and machinery. He will not, one hopes, neglect the other lesson taught him by this novel, which is the art of telling the story, selecting the actors, and skilfully using the plain and simple materials which lie around us everywhere ready to our hands. I am quite sure that the chief lesson to be learned from the study of nearly all our own modern novelists is that adventure, pathos,

amusement, and interest, are far better sought among lives which seem dull, and among people who seem at first beyond the reach of romance, than from eccentricity and peculiarity of manner, or from violent and extreme reverses and accidents of fortune. This is, indeed, only another aspect of the increased value which we have learned to attach to individual life.

One thing more the Art student has to learn. Let him not only believe his own story before he begins to tell it, but let him remember that in story-telling, as in almsgiving, a cheerful countenance works wonders, and a hearty manner greatly helps the teller and pleases the listener. One would not have the novelist make continual efforts at being comic; but let him not tell his story with eyes full of sadness, a face of woe and a shaking voice. His story may be tragic, but continued gloom is a mistake in Art, even for a tragedy. If his story is a comedy, all the more reason to tell it cheerfully and brightly. Lastly, let him tell it without apparent effort: without trying to show his cleverness, his wit, his powers of epigram, and his learning. Yet let him pour without stint or measure into his work all that he knows, all that he has seen, all that he has observed, and all that he has remembered: all that there is of nobility, sympathy, and enthusiasm in himself. Let him spare nothing, but lavish all that he has, in the full confidence that the wells will not be dried up, and that the springs of fancy and

imagination will flow again, even though he seem to have exhausted himself in this one effort.

Here, therefore, we may leave the student of this Art.* It remains for him to show whether he does wisely in following it farther. Of one thing for his encouragement he may rest assured; in the Art of Fiction more than in any other it is easy to gain recognition, far easier than in any of the sister Arts. In the English school of painting, for example, there are already so many good men in the field that it is most difficult to win an acknowledged position; in the drama it is next to impossible to get a play produced, in spite of our thirty London theatres; in poetry it seems almost hopeless to get a hearing, even if one has reached the second rank; but in Fiction the whole of the English-speaking race are always eager to welcome a newcomer; good work is instantly recognized, and the only danger is that the universal cry for more may lead to hasty and immature production. I do not mean that ready recognition will immediately bring with it a great pecuniary success. Unfortunately, there has grown up of late a bad fashion of measuring success too much by the money it seems to command. It is not always, remember, the voice of the people which elects the best man, and though in most cases it follows that a successful novelist commands a large sale of his works, it may happen that the Art of a great writer is of such a kind that it may never become widely

* See Appendix.

popular. There have been among us two or three such writers. One case will immediately occur to most of us here. It is that of a man whose books are filled with wisdom, experience, and epigram: whose characters are most admirably studied from the life, whose plots are ingenious, situations fresh, and dialogues extraordinarily clever. Yet he has never been widely popular, and, I am sure, never will be. One may be pretty certain that this writer's money-value in the market is considerably less than that of many another whose genius is not half so great, but his popularity twice as large. So that a failure to hit the popular taste does not always imply failure in Art. How, then, is one to know, when people do not ask for his work, if he has really failed or not? I think he must know without being told if he has failed to please. If a man sings a song he can tell in a moment, even before he has finished, if he has pleased his audience. So, if a man writes a novel, he can tell by the criticisms in the journals, by reading between the lines of what his friends tell him, by the expression of their eyes, by his own inner consciousness, if he has succeeded or failed. And if the latter, let him find out as quickly as may be through what causes. The unlucky dramatist can complain that his piece was badly mounted and badly acted. The novelist cannot, because he is sure not to be badly read. Therefore, if a novelist fail at first, let him be well assured that it is his own fault; and if, on his second attempt, he cannot amend, let him

for the future be silent. One is more and more astonished at seeing the repeated efforts of writers whose friends should make them understand that they have not the least chance of success unless they unlearn all that they have learned and begin again upon entirely different methods and some knowledge of the science. It must be a cruel blow, after all the work that goes to make even a bad novel, after all the trouble of getting it published, to see it drop unnoticed, stillborn, thought hardly worthy to receive words of contempt. If the disappointment leads to examination and self-amendment, it may prove the greatest blessing. But he who fails twice probably deserves to fail, because he has learned nothing, and is incapable of learning anything, from the lessons of his first failure.

Let me say one word upon the present condition of this most delightful Art in England. Remember that great Masters in every Art are rare. Perhaps one or two appear in a century: we ought not to expect more. It may even happen that those modern writers of our own whom we have agreed to call great Masters will have to take lower rank among posterity, who will have great Masters of their own. I am inclined, however, to think that a few of the nineteenth-century novelists will never be suffered to die, though they may be remembered principally for one book — that Thackeray will be remembered for his "Vanity Fair," Dickens for "David Copperfield," George Meredith for the

"Ordeal of Richard Feverel," George Eliot for "Silas Marner," Charles Reade for the "Cloister and the Hearth," and Blackmore for his "Lorna Doone." On the other hand, without thinking or troubling ourselves at all about the verdict of posterity, which matters nothing to us compared with the verdict of our contemporaries, let us acknowledge that it is a bad year indeed when we have not produced some good work, work of a very high kind, if not immortal work. An exhibition of the year's novels would generally show two or three, at least, of which the country may be, say, reasonably proud. Does the Royal Academy of Arts show every year more than two or three pictures—not immortal pictures, but pictures of which we may be reasonably proud? One would like, it is true, to see fewer bad novels published, as well as fewer bad pictures exhibited; the standard of the work which is on the borderland between success and failure should be higher. At the same time I am very sure and certain that there never has been a time when better works of Fiction have been produced, both by men and women. That Art is not declining, but is advancing, which is cultivated on true and not on false or conventional principles. Ought we not to be full of hope for the future, when such women as Mrs. Oliphant and Mrs. Thackeray Ritchie write for us—when such men as Meredith, Blackmore, Black, Payn, Wilkie Collins, and Hardy are still at their best, and such men as Louis Stevenson, Christie Murray,

Clark Russell, and Herman Merivale have just begun? I think the fiction, and, indeed, all the imaginary work of the future will be far fuller in human interest than in the past; the old stories — no doubt they will still be the old stories — will be fitted to actors who up till recently were only used for the purposes of contrast; the drama of life which formerly was assigned to kings and princes will be played by figures taken as much from the great struggling, unknown masses. Kings and great lords are chiefly picturesque and interesting on account of their beautiful costumes, and a traditional belief in their power. Costume is certainly not a strong point in the lower ranks, but I think we shall not miss that, and wherever we go for our material, whether to the higher or the lower ranks, we may be sure of finding everywhere love, sacrifice, and devotion for virtues, with selfishness, cunning, and treachery for vices. Out of these, with their endless combinations and changes, that novelist must be poor indeed who cannot make a story.

Lastly, I said at the outset that I would ask you to accord to novelists the recognition of their place as artists. But after what has been said, I feel that to urge this further would be only a repetition of what has gone before. Therefore, though not all who write novels can reach the first, or even the second, rank, wherever you find good and faithful work, with truth, sympathy, and clearness of purpose, I pray you to give the author of that work the

praise as to an Artist — an Artist like the rest — the praise that you so readily accord to the earnest student of any other Art. As for the great Masters of the Art — Fielding, Scott, Dickens, Thackeray, Victor Hugo — I, for one, feel irritated when the critics begin to appraise, compare, and to estimate them: there is nothing, I think, that we can give them but admiration that is unspeakable, and gratitude that is silent. This silence proves more eloquently than any words how great, how beautiful an Art is that of Fiction.

APPENDIX.

I HAVE been asked not to leave the young novelist at this point. Let me, therefore, venture upon a few words of advice. I do this without apology, because, like most men who write, I receive, every week, letters from young beginners asking for counsel and guidance. To all these I recommend the consideration of the rules I have laid down, and, above all, attention to truth, reality, and style.

I was once asked to read a MS. novel written by a young lady. The work was hurried, scamped, unreal—in fact, it had every fault. Yet there was something in it which made me think that there was hope for her. I therefore wrote to her, pointing out the faults, without sparing her. I added that, if she was not discouraged, but would begin again, and would prepare carefully the *scenario* of a novel, fitted with characters duly thought out, I would give her such further advice as was in my power. The *very next day* she sent me five *scenarios*. I have not heard from her since, and I hope she has renounced the Art whose very elements she could not understand.

Let me suppose, then, that the writer has got his novel completed. Here begins the “trouble,” as

the Americans say. And at this point my advice may be of use.

Remember that all publishers are eager to get good work: they are prepared to consider MSS. carefully — most of them pay men, on whose judgment they rely, men of literary standing, to read and “taste” for them; therefore it is a simple and obvious piece of advice that the writer should send his work to some good publisher, and it is perfectly certain that if the work is good it will be accepted and published. There is, as I have said in the lecture, little or no risk, even with an unknown author, over a really good novel. But, then, the first work almost always contains immaturities and errors which prevent it from being really good. More often than not, it is on the border line, not so good as to make its publication desirable by a firm which will only issue good work, or by any means safe to pay its expenses. What then? I would advise the author never, from any considerations of vanity or self-confidence, to pay money to a publisher for bringing out his book. There are certain publishing houses, not the best, which bring out yearly quantities of novels, nearly every one of which is paid for by the author, because they are not good enough to pay their own expenses. Do not, I would say, swell the ranks of those who give the enemy reason to blaspheme this Art. Refuse absolutely to publish on such ignominious terms. Remember that to be asked for money to pay for

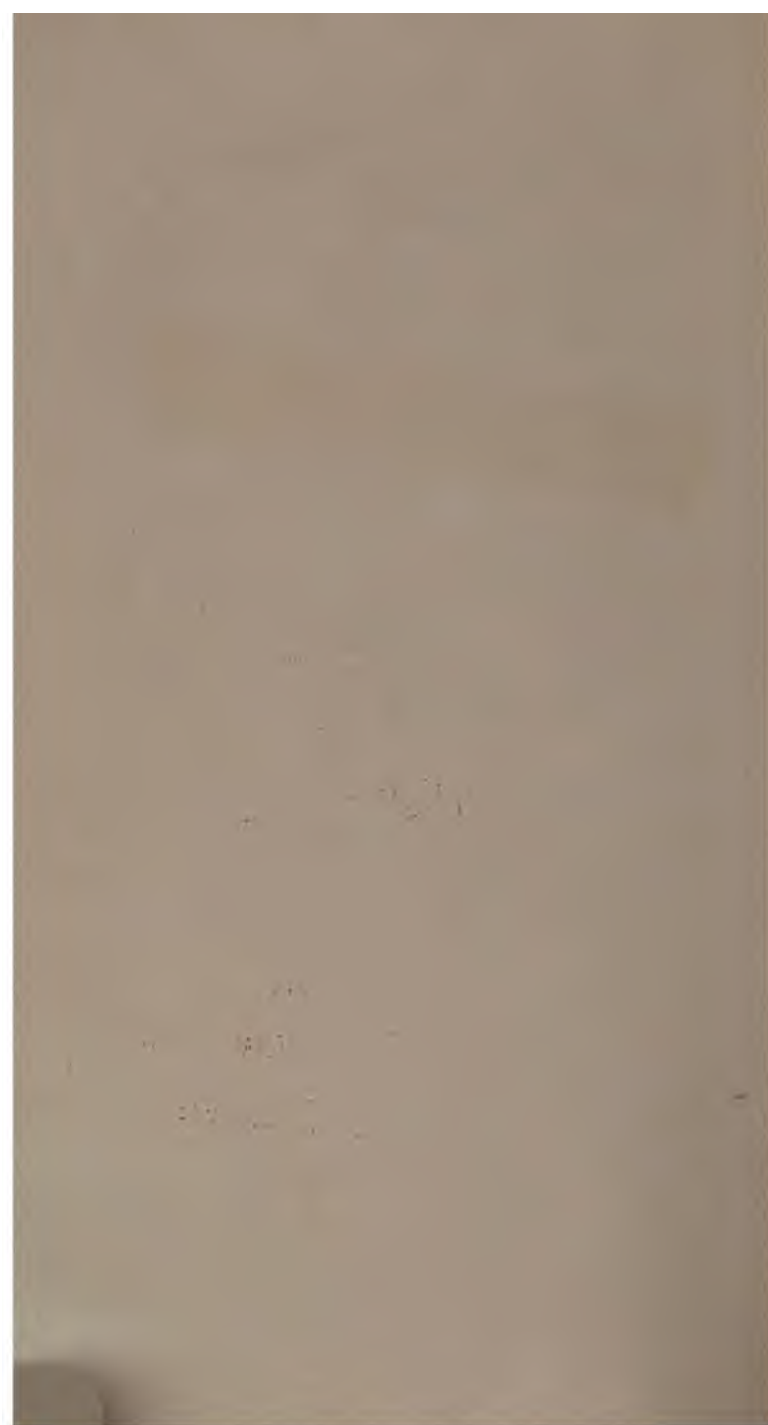
the expense of publication is to be told that your work is not good enough to be published. If you have tried the half-dozen best publishers, and been refused by all, realize that the work *will not do*. Then, if you can, get the advice of some experienced man of letters upon it, and ponder over his judgment.

If you cannot, reconsider the whole story from the beginning, with special reference to the rules which are here laid down. If necessary, rewrite the whole. Or, if necessary, put the whole into the fire, and, without being disheartened, begin again with another and a better story. Do not aim at producing an absolutely new plot. You cannot do it. But persevere, if you feel that the root of the matter is in you, till your work is accepted; and *never, NEVER, NEVER* pay for publishing a novel.

Let me end with a little piece of personal history.

A good many years ago, there was a young man of four or five and twenty, who ardently desired before all things to become a novelist. He spent a couple of years, giving to the work all his unemployed hours, over a novel of modern life. He took immense pains with it, rewrote some of the scenes half a dozen times, and spared neither labor nor thought to make it as good as he could make it. When he really felt that he could do nothing more with it, he rolled it up and sent it to a friend with the request that he would place it anonymously in Mr. Macmillan's hands. Mr. Macmillan had it care-

fully read, and sent the author, still through the friend, his reader's opinion. The reader did not sign his opinion, but he was a Cambridge man, a critic of judgment, a man of taste, a kindly man, and he had once been, if he was not still, a mathematician. These things were clearly evident from his handwriting, as well as from the wording of his verdict. This was to the effect that the novel should not be published, for certain reasons which he proceeded to give. But he laid down his objections with very great consideration for the writer, indicating for his encouragement what he considered points of promise, suggesting certain practical rules of construction which had been violated, and showing where ignorance of the Art and inexperience of life had caused faults such as to make it most undesirable for the author, as well as impossible for a publisher of standing, to produce the work. The writer, after the first pangs of disappointment, plucked up heart and began to ponder over the lessons contained in that opinion. The young man has since become a novelist, "of a sort," and he takes this opportunity of returning his most sincere thanks to Mr. Macmillan for his kindness in considering and refusing to publish an immature novel, and to his anonymous critic for his invaluable letter. Would that all publishers' readers were like unto that reader, as conscientious and as kindly, and as anxious to save beginners from putting forth bad work!





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